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Mr. Bryan May

Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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● (1610)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.)): Good afternoon, everybody. We're going to get started right away. We have some bells that are going to be ringing fairly soon, so without any preamble, today we are considering, pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), main estimates 2018-19, vote 1 under Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, vote 1 under Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, and votes 1 and 5 under Department of Employment and Social Development, referred to the committee on Monday, April 16, 2018.

We're very pleased to have with us today the Honourable Jean-Yves Duclos, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development; the Honourable Kirsty Duncan, Minister of Science and Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities; and the Honourable Patty Hajdu, Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour.

Thank you very much. I don't know if you've rock-paper-scissored to determine who is going to go first.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Steven Blaney (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC): Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

As you know, we started the meeting late because the government is muzzling the opposition in the House of Commons.

I'd like to say how glad I am that the three ministers before us today submitted their presentations to the committee in writing.

As you know, more votes will be taking place in the House in about an hour, so I propose that we move directly into questions. We can read the ministers' presentations afterwards.

[*English*]

The Chair: It's a little unusual. I think I'd like to stick with the normal way of doing things, if that's okay.

Mr. Mark Warawa (Langley—Aldergrove, CPC): Could I speak to the point of order?

Thank you, Chair. I'm not actually—

The Chair: I'm going to have to interrupt here because this is actually not a point of order and we do have limited time. I would like to now turn the floor over to—

Mr. Mark Warawa: I have a point of order.

Anything that has to do with the Standing Orders and procedure and the schedule is a point of order. I would move that we begin—

The Chair: You can't move a motion at this point. I'm sorry.

Ms. Sansoucy.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP): If I understand correctly, Mr. Chair, we won't be voting on the motion. I supported the motion and had questions ready to go.

Having the ministers here gives us the opportunity to have a more in-depth discussion. Personally, I agree with the idea of moving right into the question and answer portion of the meeting.

What you're telling us, Mr. Chair, is that we are going to start with the ministers' presentations. Is that correct?

● (1615)

[*English*]

The Chair: That's correct. We're going to follow the same standard that we normally would.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: In that case, I'm going to finish—

[*English*]

The Chair: We will be coming back after votes, I believe. There will be time for questions.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: In that case, I'm going to use my time, Mr. Chair, to tell you that I'd now like to discuss the motion for which I gave notice last week. For the benefit of—

[*English*]

The Chair: Excuse me. Sorry.

Mr. Mark Warawa: She has the floor.

The Chair: No. It was on a point of order that wasn't a point of order.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: For the benefit of the ministers here today, I will read the motion:

That the committee undertakes a study for at least 6 sittings on the Employment Insurance sickness benefits program to examine especially, but not exclusively

a. if the programme meets the real needs of the claimants;

b. the impact of the length of the benefits on the claimants and on their recovery;

c. the program accessibility;

d. the population affected by this program and their characteristics; and hear, not limited to this list, witnesses from the health sector, former claimants or groups representing them, the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development; and that it report on its conclusions to the House.

Having the ministers here today makes this a good time to discuss the motion.

I would like to continue the debate. This is an important motion. This is a study the committee should undertake, and we should vote to go ahead with the study. The Minister, himself, said publicly that the issue was important and even committed to looking into it in the year following the interview he did with Radio-Canada television. Since that year is up, however, I think it's very important that we discuss this motion and move forward with the study.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you. On the order here, I have Mark, then Mona, and then Steven.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Thank you, Chair. I appreciate the motion. We do have the minister here. I think it's very appropriate that we deal with this now. I'm disappointed that we didn't go straight to questions, but this is a way of dealing with it, a very important issue that my colleague has raised. I think the motion is appropriate and if we deal with it now, then we'll have an opportunity as a committee to give direction to the minister that this is what we'll be doing.

I'm also concerned that this issue is not a new issue. This is an issue that has been brought by my colleague before, and other members of Parliament, and the government has promised in the past that it would deal with this, and it hasn't.

That's why we have this before us today.

We are here today entertaining a motion like this because the government has moved a motion to stop debate in the House, and also to cause a vote where we have to be going back and forth. There's a vote to return to orders of the day, which took away a half hour of this meeting, and that first half hour would have been an opportunity when the ministers would have spoken.

The government moved that, and members of this committee—the government members—actually supported that in the House, so we started this meeting a half hour late. So for us to deal with this motion now, I think, is a necessity, and—

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): Chair, what's the relevancy here?

The Chair: Are you getting to the end here? Thank you.

Mr. Mark Warawa: The relevance is that this should have been dealt with by the government, and my concern is that if I don't speak to this, the next action.... This is what the government has done before: Liberal members move that the debate now be adjourned.

If that is what the government members move, they have stopped debate in the House. They've restricted our time to ask the ministers questions, the three ministers here, and my hope is that what I'm expecting isn't going to happen, that the government members will actually permit debate on this, will respect members of the opposition. We have official opposition members—Conservative members—and an NDP member, and I hope the government members will respect the members who want to ask questions, and not take away our time through procedure. This meeting is televised, Chair, and so the public can see what's happening.

Whether the government is going to be fair and listen, or whether the government is going to abuse our rights—and our rights are the rights, Chair, to represent our community and what we're hearing from our constituents.

Canadians are not happy with what's happening, so I encourage members...and I'm going to be giving up my time now, so that a Liberal member will have a chance to speak, and I surely hope that I'm wrong. I hope they will not move a motion to end debate, as they have in the past.

● (1620)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Warawa.

I would remind all of us that we are televised, and we are actually here to hear from the ministers, and not necessarily to deal with a particular motion that we agree has merit, but there's a proper time and place.

Mona Fortier, go ahead please.

Mrs. Mona Fortier (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): I will quickly move the motion to adjourn the debate. Thank you.

The Chair: All those in favour of adjourning—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: I'd like a recorded division.

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 5; nays 4)

The Chair: With that, the debate is adjourned.

Monsieur Duclos, the next few minutes are yours, sir.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Committee members, thank you for inviting me, Minister Hajdu, and Minister Duncan.

I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered on the traditional territory of the Algonquin people.

Mr. Chair, it is always a pleasure to be with you and the members of this committee.

I would also like to thank the department's employees, who work so hard day in and day out and make it possible for us to be here today.

I would like to tell the committee members that I recognize and appreciate the work that you do, and I am happy to be here to talk to you about my responsibilities regarding Employment and Social Development Canada's main estimates, as Minister of Families, Children and Social Development.

Our government contributes to actively improve the social and economic well-being of Canadians in the middle class and those working hard to join it.

My department's budget shows the variety of programs we have to achieve this, and to ensure that Canadians profit from and take part in our economic growth.

[*English*]

As you know, an important part of my mandate is to ensure that fewer Canadians live in poverty. For me, this is much more than a goal; it's a personal quest. Finding opportunities to reduce poverty is the reason I became an economist many years ago and a politician just a few years ago. Over the past year we have been very active in developing the first ever Canadian poverty reduction strategy.

Let me take this opportunity to thank the HUMA committee for your valuable report entitled "Breaking the Cycle: A Study on Poverty Reduction", tabled in the House last year. This important report has already played a key role in helping our government determine the way forward on poverty reduction. It was considered an essential part of the extensive consultations that we did on the subject, which started with the consultation paper I released when you invited me to start your important work last year. Again, thank you very much.

I believe you are also familiar with the tackling poverty together project, which aimed to provide valuable insight to support our poverty reduction strategy. This project supports evidence-based decision-making, as it provides performance measurement data and important feedback from lived experiences of poverty.

Following extensive consultations with Canadians, we held a national poverty conference and workshop and we released a report, "Canadian Poverty Reduction Strategy - What we heard about poverty so far". This work is instrumental in shaping an informed, effective strategy to reduce poverty in this country.

Canada's first national poverty reduction strategy will take a long-term view in setting targets. It will make sure that the proper tools are in place to measure and to report on progress. It will also build on initiatives we've already taken to reduce poverty and increase opportunity, for example, the work we are doing to help those most in need, such as low-income workers.

● (1625)

[*Translation*]

Implementing the new Canada workers benefit, announced in 2018, will put more money in the pockets of low-income workers to support them as they work hard to join the middle class. We estimate that this measure alone will help some 70,000 Canadians get out of poverty by 2020 and will encourage more Canadians earning a modest wage to join the workforce and remain in it. For low-income workers and their families, this represents more opportunity and real change in their lives.

To help Canadian families, we are also improving the Canada child benefit, which has already had a considerable impact on people's lives, to ensure that it keeps up with the rising cost of living, starting in July—two years earlier than planned.

Support programs like the Canada child benefit are important. That's why we are taking measures to ensure that those who need them can access them.

In light of this, we will increase our awareness efforts in indigenous communities, which face unique obstacles to accessing financial support. This is important because the average amount families receive through the Canada child benefit is nearly $7,000 per year.

These non-taxable benefits go directly into the pockets of Canadians, who can then use this money to buy healthy food or clothes, books, and school supplies for their children. We must also ensure that this support benefits all families who need it.

Along with this benefit, we are taking steps to help young families who often do not have access to child care service because it is too expensive or there are no available places. We are investing $7.5 billion over 11 years in early learning and child care, and we have reached three-year bilateral funding agreements with all the provinces and territories.

[*English*]

We're also working with indigenous partners to co-develop an indigenous early learning and child care framework, which will reflect the unique cultures and needs of first nations, Inuit, and Métis communities across our great country.

Supporting families is certainly a priority for all of us. One of the most meaningful actions we can take in their lives is to help them have a roof over their heads and a place to call home.

Last November we released Canada's first ever national housing strategy. This 10-year, $40-billion plan covers the entire housing continuum, from shelters and affordable housing to market rentals and home ownership. It is an ambitious plan that will lift half a million households out of housing need and will result in up to 100,000 new housing units and 300,000 repaired or renewed housing units.

Complementing our work on housing, last June we also established the Advisory Committee on Homelessness, chaired by parliamentary secretary Adam Vaughan, to provide advice on the redesign of our homelessness partnering strategy. We want to better prevent and reduce homelessness in this country, and that is exactly what we intend to do.

We released the committee's first report along with a "what we heard" report last week, and we plan to announce an expanded and redesigned federal homelessness program in the near future.

[*Translation*]

Despite the important measures I just mentioned and that we have taken to help all Canadians who have difficulty making ends meet, we know it is always possible to do better.

For example, our government implemented automatic enrolment in guaranteed income supplement benefits. Once recipients are registered for old age security benefits, their file is automatically reviewed each year for the guaranteed income supplement in case their income has decreased and they need this additional support to make ends meet.

We know how important these benefits are. That is why one of the first things our government did was to restore the eligibility age for old age security to 65, keeping 100,000 seniors from falling into poverty each year.

We also took action to help the seniors of tomorrow by working with the provinces to improve the Canada pension plan so that Canadians who have worked hard all their lives can have more money when they retire.

● (1630)

[*English*]

Canadians also expect fast, simple, and quality service from their government. They deserve to receive services and benefits in a timely fashion. With the new realities of today, they also need more flexibility.

For new mothers, greater flexibility can mean equality at home and at work. For example, our new employment insurance parental sharing benefit will support greater gender equality by adding five weeks of EI parental benefits when both parents agree to share parental leave, or an additional eight weeks for those who choose the extended parental benefit option. The "use it or lose it" incentive encourages and promotes a more equal sharing of the responsibilities and joys of raising children.

We are also proposing legislation to make the current EI working while on claim pilot project permanent. This project helps people stay connected with the labour market by encouraging them to accept work and earn additional income while receiving their EI benefits. Its rules would also now be expanded to sickness and maternity claimants, who currently have their benefits reduced dollar for dollar if they earn income while on EI. This would assist sickness claimants to stagger their return to work.

When it comes to benefits, choice and flexibility are very important, and so is access. That's why we've put a focus on service delivery. We are improving services to Canadians through recent budget investments, including the doubling of EI call centre accessibility from 30% to more than 60% since 2015-16. An additional $128 million over three years, announced in budget 2018, will further increase EI call centre accessibility to 70%.

[*Translation*]

In conclusion, it is clear that we are working to reduce and eliminate barriers that keep Canadians from fully contributing to and benefiting from our country's economic growth. Even though Canada's economy is strong, there are still too many Canadians who have difficulty making ends meet.

Working together to reduce poverty, improving people's quality of life, and giving everyone a better chance to succeed in life are some of the goals we are pursuing through our initiatives. Moreover, we are paying particular attention to the methods we use to deliver services. Through this important work, we hope to grow the middle class and help those working hard to join it by ensuring that everyone can benefit from our fast-growing economy.

I hope we can continue this excellent partnership we have, and continue benefiting from your recommendations to achieve our shared goals.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Warawa.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Chair, in our manual, *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*—

The Chair: Actually, before we proceed down that track—sorry to interrupt—we do have bells. Do I have unanimous consent that we stay?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay, go ahead, sir.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Chair, when we invite people, particularly parliamentarians, to come to this committee, there is no obligation for them to come, and they are invited so that we can ask questions. The amount of time is at your discretion, Chair.

In the routine motions that I have before me, it's at the discretion of the Chair to have five to 10 minutes. The concern that was raised at the very beginning of this was that we wanted to have time to ask questions of the ministers. That time was taken up and we asked to be able to move right to questions instead of having statements, for which we have written speeches. The committee said no.

How much time would then be up to your discretion. The time you allotted for a half hour meeting—and actually less than a half hour meeting—was 10 minutes. You have the discretion from five to 10. You gave them 10, and the first witness was allowed over eleven and a half minutes.

The point that I'm making, Chair, is that because of the discretion of the Chair, we have lost our opportunity in this first round to ask questions of these ministers. We can assure you that there will be a motion to invite these ministers back, because they were not invited to speak to us. They were invited, particularly by members of the opposition, all of us, to ask them questions.

There are more government members on this committee than there are opposition members. There are only four opposition members here, and our right to ask questions of these ministers has been removed. I'm very concerned that the rules were applied in that way.

Chair, I hope that your discretion will be used to ensure that we always have the right to ask questions, particularly if it's ministers coming to report to this committee and to answer questions about how they are spending Canadians' money. We want to hold them accountable for that, and we've lost that opportunity today.

Thank you.

● (1635)

The Chair: I thank you for that opinion. Unfortunately, you may have missed one of the things I said earlier, which was that we will be coming back so that we can in fact ask questions. We have actually wasted 25 minutes moving motions and points of order. That is what we have accomplished today, so you're right; we have lost a significant amount of time today. I assure you that we will be asking to extend when we come back, so that we will have sufficient time with the ministers. If you remember, sir, I did actually say we would be coming back. The ministers are going to be coming back to answer those questions you're concerned about.

I understand what you're doing right now, and I appreciate that. This is the role of opposition at times, but please, let's get back to it. If we are going to continue to stay, Minister Hajdu, the next few minutes are yours.

Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour): Mr. Chair and members of the committee, thank you so much for the opportunity to speak about—

The Chair: I apologize once again. More games are being played, and consent has been removed for us to continue to sit, so we will come back as soon as possible, and you will be first up. Thank you.

We will suspend.

● ——————— (Pause) ———————

●

● (1720)

The Chair: We're going to resume.

Minister Hajdu, I'm afraid we have only five minutes for your remarks, and Ms. Duncan will have about five minutes as well.

The next five minutes are yours.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair and members of the committee, for the opportunity to speak to you today about Employment and Social Development Canada's portion of the 2018-19 main estimate and to outline how important programs will be delivered by the department.

[*Translation*]

Before we begin, I, too, would like to acknowledge that we are gathered on the traditional territory of the Algonquin people.

[*English*]

As Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour, I am firmly focused on making sure that every Canadian has a fair chance to succeed. Since November 2015, Canadians have created over 600,000 jobs, most of which are full-time. The unemployment rate is now near historic lows, and Canada is leading the G7 countries in economic growth.

We know, however, that there's still more work to do. We need equality of opportunity for all Canadians to reach their full potential. This is a lens that we apply to everything we do as a government.

[*Translation*]

The fact is, for women and girls, there are still many barriers to overcome. Our government is intent on breaking down those barriers.

Budget 2018 focused on actions to ensure that the benefits of a growing economy are shared by more and more people.

[*English*]

Part of this action includes measures to promote gender equality through pay equity. On average, women earn just 69¢ for every dollar earned by men on an annual basis, even though about three-quarters of young women have post-secondary certificates or a degree. That's not right. It's also not very smart. It's why we're moving forward with proactive pay equity legislation.

We also have to address this wage gap for women and other vulnerable populations through pay transparency measures, which will provide Canadians with information on the pay practices of federally regulated employers. These measures will help to highlight those employers who model equitable pay practices, while holding employers accountable for wage gaps.

We have also taken action to promote and advance women in occupations in which they're currently under-represented. Indeed, we've put forward measures to further support the participation and success of women in the trades. We announced three initiatives as part of budget 2018. These are $46 million over five years for a new pre-apprenticeship program; $19.9 million over five years to pilot an apprenticeship incentive grant for women; and $10 million over three years for the new women in construction fund.

[*Translation*]

We are confident that the steps we are taking to promote gender equality will go a long way to ensure everyone has an equal chance of success.

[*English*]

It's very important that women and other vulnerable workers have the same opportunities when it comes to getting a job and succeeding in that job. We have to ensure that every person can work in an environment free of harassment and violence. Bill C-65 will do just that by helping to put an end to these unacceptable behaviours in federally regulated workplaces and on Parliament Hill. It will require employers to prevent incidents of harassment and violence, to respond effectively if these incidents happen and when they occur, and to support victims.

Through budget 2018 we announced $34.9 million over five years starting in 2018-19, and $7.4 million per year ongoing, to build awareness on harassment and violence, create education and training tools for employees and employers, and establish a toll-free helpline to help employers and employees navigate the process and put in place effective workplace policies.

I want to thank again the members of this committee, who I know worked incredibly hard to propose amendments that will strengthen Bill C-65, for working so collaboratively to get the job done.

● (1725)

In addition to Bill C-65, we are also taking steps to modernize our labour standards. Innovation is changing the way that we work and live, bringing with it new realities for Canadian workers and employers. In this rapidly changing environment, we need to continue to protect the rights and well-being of workers while ensuring that employers have the flexibility they need to succeed.

You will recall that in budget 2017 we proposed to give federally regulated private sector employees the right to request flexible work arrangements from their employer, such as flexible start and finish times and the ability to work from home.

Budget 2017 also made bereavement leave more flexible and introduced new leave for family responsibilities, to participate in traditional indigenous practices, and for employees who are victims of family violence, or the parent of a child who is the victim of family violence. These measures will help employees in the federally regulated private sector to better balance their work, family, and other personal responsibilities.

We are continuing our work on that front. In budget 2018 we announced that we intend to make five days of the new 10-day leave for family violence paid. How can we make sure that all of this actually happens, once these and other new measures are in place? Well, of course we need stronger compliance and enforcement measures. For example, amendments made to the Canada Labour Code, such as the introduction of monetary penalties and administrative fees and the authority to publicly name violators, will update enforcement tools, bringing the code in line with regimes that exist in other jurisdictions.

I think the chair is giving me notice that my time is done.

I want very much to talk about all of the other exciting things we're doing, but we'll have to save that for a later date.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Minister Duncan, the next five minutes are all yours. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Kirsty Duncan (Minister of Science and Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities): Mr. Chair and members of the committee, good afternoon.

[*English*]

I would like to begin by acknowledging that we are on Algonquin territory and thank the Algonquin people for sharing their land with us.

It is a pleasure to be here today with my colleagues, ministers Duclos and Hajdu, and with our officials, to speak to you about the main estimates.

This is the first time I am appearing before the committee as Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities, and I am pleased to provide information and perspectives on our work and ambitions with regard to people with disabilities.

[*Translation*]

I am honoured to support those with disabilities and deeply committed to ensuring that they have access to the supports they need for full inclusion in our society.

[*English*]

Approximately 14% of Canadians 15 years of age or older report having a disability that limits them in their daily activities, and close to 2.3 million families in Canada provide day-to-day support for a family member with a disability. That number will only continue to grow as our population ages. Not only is this important to people with disabilities and to our government, but it is important to all Canadians.

That's why my priority as minister is to put in place new federal accessibility legislation to help break down barriers in areas of federal jurisdiction. Once in place, the legislation will increase the inclusion and participation of Canadians who have disabilities or functional limitations in their communities and workplaces. It will also promote equality of opportunity for everyone. Right now that opportunity doesn't always exist. We intend to change this.

New federal legislation would set out expectations or standards for inclusion and accessibility and would help to address systemic issues so that discrimination doesn't happen in the first place. It would also help provide a framework to break down barriers in areas in which the Government of Canada has authority and can show leadership, so that we all have a more equal chance of success.

As you may know, last year we concluded the most extensive and accessible consultation process, which is informing the development of this historic legislation. We reached more than 6,000 Canadians and advocates in cities across Canada.

● (1730)

[*Translation*]

Canadians shared their stories with us, the challenges they have encountered in relation to accessibility, and their ideas and hopes for the new law. A report on what we learned from Canadians during the consultation process was released at the end of last year.

[*English*]

We plan to introduce new federal accessibility legislation in Parliament soon to eliminate barriers and ensure greater accessibility and opportunities for Canadians with disabilities in areas under federal jurisdiction, including employment, transportation, access to buildings, and use of information and services.

Ultimately, our goal is to ensure equality, inclusion, and full participation in Canadian society for persons with disabilities.

My main focus is to make this goal a reality, to build upon the important work that has taken place and table new legislation that will ensure equality of opportunity for people with disabilities that many Canadians take for granted.

While the tabling of this legislation remains my top priority, it is only one part of our government's efforts to increase the inclusion of people with disabilities. I wish I could talk about our enabling accessibility fund, our opportunities fund, our social development and partnerships program, and the new investments we've made for the opportunities fund, which is a new investment of $77 million over 10 years that will allow us to have greater inclusion in communities and workplaces.

In conclusion, let me say that making sure every Canadian has a fair and equal chance at success is not just the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to, and our future prosperity depends on it.

I want to thank this committee for its support and guidance in breaking down barriers for persons with disabilities. We know nothing will be rectified overnight, but we also know we can get there and together we will make Canada a more accessible nation than it is today.

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Thank you to all ministers. Unfortunately, the clock is now reading 5:32. I wish we did have time for questions. We should have had time for questions, and I apologize for that, but I do really appreciate your being here.

Thank you, everybody.

The meeting is adjourned.

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